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ABSTRACT

The study described in this summary explores school and community factors that encourage parent participation in decisions that affect the quality of children's schooling. Its primary objective was to identify and compare factors that foster parent networks around school issues in suburban and urban areas. Five groups mobilized by middle class parents in the early 1970s to promote reforms in a suburban New York school district were identified, and their role in fostering school related networks was reviewed. Next, a description of formal arrangements that allow for parental involvement in this school district were contrasted to opportunities for minority parent involvement in schools in five Chicago neighborhoods. Based on differences in parent participation in the two study areas, several recommendations were offered: (1) provide support for independent groups that are interested in reforming schools; (2) develop new procedures to represent and validate parental concerns; (3) implement training programs for parents to increase their access to new ideas; and (4) foster clarification of parents' role and promotion of meaningful parent participation by administrators and school personnel. (AOS)

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PARENTS' SCHOOL NETWORKS

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF SCHOOL-COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENTS AND PARENT PARTICIPATION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Conducted for the

National Institute of Education

by

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This study explores school and community factors that promote parent participation in decisions that affect the quality of their children's schooling. A primary objective was to identify and compare factors that foster parent networks around school issues in suburban and urban areas.

STUDY BACKGROUND. Almost every strategy devised to improve educational services for inner city minority students is based on a middle class suburban model. This generalization applies particularly to parent advisory councils mandated by compensatory programs and such political reforms as decentralization which assume that the provision of formal participatory structures within the school system will enable poor and minority parents to influence decisions related to the educational services delivered to their children.

We believe that the above assumption is based on stereotypes that have perpetuated an image of suburban schools "run" by middle class parents, mainly mothers, who hire and fire principals and teachers. This image is not supported by empirical research conducted prior to 1970 which indicated low levels of parent participation and little, or no, parent influence in curriculum and personnel decisions in both urban and suburban school districts.

Our review of the literature on decision making suggested that before designing more reforms to foster participation of inner city parents, there was a need for research that would accomplish the following:

- Analyze the impact of reforms which legitimated parent participation in decisions related to the quality of educational services.

- Document the experiences of suburban parents whose efforts to influence policy reflect these reforms.

- Identify the school and community resources that enabled the parents to develop influence. A major focus should be on the formal and informal settings which create opportunities for parents to develop social networks that promote the exchange of information and support around school issues.

- Investigate the extent to which inner city poor and minority parents would have access to the same or comparable resources.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY. As a first step in this research agenda, we identified 5 groups mobilized by middle class parents in the early 1970s to promote reforms in "Eastport," a New York suburban school district. Selection criteria were: previous efforts to promote the reform had been rejected by local educational authorities, mobilization was generated by parents (rather than professional organizers), and the group was effective (the goal was reflected in a school board policy or administrative decision).

In four cases the group's goal reflected an innovation or concept endorsed at the national level. They included: an open classroom alternative, special programs for children with learning disabilities, programs responsive to the needs of black students, and a systemwide elementary lunch program policy. For comparative purposes, we selected a fifth group that promoted traditional issues: improvements in high school management procedures and student-teacher relations.

Section II presents a history of school-community relations that highlights some of the factors that influenced changes in parent participation between the early 1960s and early 170s. Each of the five groups is described (Section III) in terms of six factors:

background on the problem, formation of the group, the core and resources, strategy and negotiations with school officials, internal management and effectiveness.

To explore the extent to which the school and/or community provided settings that foster school-related networks, interviews with 42 group initiators and principal actors focused on how or where they had met parents recruited to the group and others who they could turn to for support (Section IV).

Section V-A describes the formal arrangements provided by the Eastport school system that create opportunities for a parent to interact with other parents and school personnel, and the community characteristics which appear to foster parent interaction around school issues. An inventory of the resources available to the 5 parent groups is presented in Section V-B.

We then assessed the availability of comparable resources to minority parents in 5 Chicago neighborhoods. Findings are based on interviews with 45 black and Latino parents, 47 community informants, and 42 city level informants. In addition we observed parent meetings and inspected the neighborhood at each site. Selection of the 5 neighborhoods was designed to identify some of the factors that promote or impede the acquisition of mobilization resources at schools with predominantly minority enrollments (Section VI-B).

Section VII-A describes some of the major structural differences in Chicago and Eastport. A summary of the data on each school site (Section VII-B), includes the following factors: the neighborhood environment, parent leadership, changes in rates of

parent participation, and community organizations with resources for parents. The similarities and differences between the Chicago and suburban parents and their school-community environments are discussed in Section VII-C.

Since the urban phase of the present study was limited to one city, and interviews conducted only with black and Latino parents, we asked researchers familiar with other urban neighborhoods to comment on a summary of the suburban data (Section VIII).

The implications of the study and recommendations for policy makers, practitioners and parents are presented in Section IX.

MAJOR FINDINGS ON THE SUBURBAN PARENT GROUPS

1. Parents had to form independent groups and organize outside the school system.

   - Initial rejection of the demand by local authorities forced the parents to organize outside of the established channels for representing parent interests (the PTA and the school board).

   - In the 1960s, decisions related to the school program were controlled by professional educators who also defined the parent's role.

2. Administrators undermined parents who challenged the system.

   - In all cases, the first parents to challenge local school practices were intimidated by school administrators and defensive parent leaders.

   - Critics were labeled "troublemakers," "neurotics" and/or "militants." These labels discouraged most parents from taking the challengers seriously and discredited them in the eyes of board members.

3. Endorsement of the innovation or concept by outside authorities created new resources for local parents.

- The Civil Rights and decentralization movements promoted the notion that parents have a right to influence decisions that affect the quality of their children's schooling. New social science knowledge challenged the traditional standards for allocating educational services.

- The new knowledge reinforced demands for curriculum modifications and alternative programs to meet individual needs.

- These new concepts legitimated parent mobilization around special interests.

4. The mother's role has been influenced by the feminist movement.

   - All five groups were initiated by women who were socialized to play an active role in their children's schooling.

   - The groups involved with issues that reflected the new concepts included professionals who worked outside the home. They were either newcomers to the community or had not been active in school affairs prior to forming the group.

5. Group structure. All groups began with an ad hoc structure and consisted of three roles: initiator, core member and peripheral members. The ad hoc structure appears to serve 3 purpuses:

   - It enables newcomers to develop leadership skills.

   - It provides low-risk participation for parent leaders whose overt identification with the challengers might jeopardize relationships with administrators.

   - It is an efficient, low-cost organizing mechanism.

6. The school setting was the most frequently mentioned site for meeting parents recruited to the groups.

   - Forty percent of the initial recruits were met through participation in activities sponsored by the school system or the PTA. The rest were met through informal settings.

   - Community organizations played a minor role as a setting for meeting parents.

7. The school setting was the most frequently mentioned site for meeting the people mentioned in the parents' networks.

   - The parent's network included all the people outside the group who were perceived as likely to support the parent's education interests.

- Forty-four percent of the people mentioned were met in a school setting.

8. School-related interaction settings for parents to develop networks through which they can exchange resources are:

   - Regularly scheduled open board meetings held in the evening.
   - Democratic procedures for citizen participation in school board elections and budget decisions.
   - An independent parent organization.
   - Parent organized events that attract parents.
   - School sponsored activities related to parents' own children.
   - Parent volunteer programs.
   - School board sponsored citizen study committees.
   - Class mother system. (See Section VI.)

9. Community related characteristics that appear to influence rates of participation around school issues are:

   - A heterogeneous population which creates a basis for developing conflicting views on how the schools should be run.
   - Leadership continuity.
   - Perception of a threat. Parents and/or citizens have information on a problem or situation perceived as threatening to their or their child's interest. The presence of a local newspaper that reports school news on a regular basis helps to promote awareness.
   - School personnel who reside in the school district.
   - Settings that provide services or facilities for parents with young children.

10. Mobilization Resources. (Section V-B)

    - The most effective groups were those whose membership included: opinion leaders, a political strategist, an educational expert, mediators, a coordinator, mobilizers, "insiders" (people who worked in the school system), monitors and effective speakers.

- Parents who were active in the PTA and school volunteers had the largest personal networks.

11. Effectiveness. The evidence suggests that parent-generated demands are likely to be adopted and implemented under the following conditions:

    - The issue has been endorsed by external authorities.
    - No additional costs are incurred by the local district or the local district is willing to pick up the new costs.
    - Implementation does not require a change in the regular program or teacher behavior.
    - The group can prove that it represents a critical constituency (e.g., a sizeable number of parents have children affected by the issue).
    - The issue reflects a cause or ideology around which members can develop commitment or group identity.

MAJOR FINDINGS: FIVE URBAN NEIGHBORHOODS

1. The Chicago school system provides few opportunities for parents to meet and interact with school personnel and other parents.

    - Parents have no formal role in the selection of school board members or budget decisions.
    - Participation at the local school level is fragmented by a multiplicity of parent councils.
    - At some schools principls have not activated parent councils mandated by the school board.

2. Chicago minority parents appeared more dependent on community organization resources than the Eastport parents.

    - In all cases where parents had been active in the past or the present, city level advocacy groups or community organizations played an important role in providing technical assistance.

3. Sustained parent participation appears to be associated with:

    - Leadership continuity

- Parent leadership training that emphasizes independence.

- Availability of resources from an independent community organization (e.g., it is not affiliated with the school system and does not depend on government agencies for funds).

4. Inactive parent councils and ineffective parent leaders appear to be associated with:

   - Failure of the principal to constitute a parent council.

   - Isolation of parents from parents at other schools and other districts.

5. Organizational resources available to inner city parents have several weaknesses. We have identified the following:

   - Racial/ethnic separatism. Parents at schools with predominantly black and Latino enrollments appeared isolated from education-related information sources except for the advocacy organizations run by members of their own ethnic group who tend to focus on ideas that promote the interests of the ethnic group. These may or may not benefit the children's schooling.

   - Support for community organizations has declined. Surviving organizations appear to be service oriented. They tend to address problems identified by funding agencies or professionals rather than problems identified by parents.

   - Many organizations stress confrontation tactics which discourage parents from participating in their activities.

   - Organizations in some communities do not work together or share resources.

6. A tour of the neighborhoods around each of the 5 school sites suggest 6 factors that reduce opportunities for inner city parents to interact in informal settings:

   - The absence of a central business area or service center.

   - Gentrification and vandalism. In neighborhoods slated for renewal there are, on almost every block, vacant lots, burned out buildings, and empty apartments.

   - High crime rates. Residents are afraid to go out at night to attend evening meetings.

   - Lack of public recreational facilities in the neighborhood.

- Isolation of the school building from the center of the community (if there is a center).

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. INDEPENDENT SUPPORT SYSTEMS. Independent groups are an important resource for reforming schools. Resource networks which provide focused training and assistance would be an important function of an independent support system.
2. PARENT REPRESENTATION. The procedures for dealing with parent concerns are threatening to parents. School board members are dependent on staff members for information. There is a need to develop new procedures to represent parents and validate their charges and/or concerns independent of the staff.
3. PARENT TRAINING PROGRAMS SHOULD BE SUPPORTED. Such programs should include strategies to create and expand personal and group level networks and other skills that will enable parents to function independent of the trainers and share available resources. To increase parent access to new ideas, training programs should be held outside the school district or developed with and include people from outside the school district. This would open up channels for disseminating new ideas, resource exchange, etc. Funded programs should include these specifications.
4. THE PARENT'S ROLE HAS CHANGED. Some parents have been influenced by reforms that encourage them to play an active part in decisions related to their child's schooling. F dings suggest the need to:

a. Clarify the parent's role

b. Develop appropriate procedures to promote meaningful parent participation

c. Provide training in problem solving and conflict resolution for practitioners and parents

5. PARENT COUNCILS. School boards should develop methods to identify schools with inactive councils and provide resources to promote parent leadership. Working parents should develop alternatives to traditional PTAs and councils.

6. PARENT NETWORKS are fostered by school activities that create opportunities for parents to interact with other parents and school personnel. Training workshops for practitioners and parents should provide techniques and activities that have attracted parents in different contexts. Incentives should be created for practitioners to encourage parent participation and for parents to volunteer for school roles.

7. FUTURE RESEARCH. Findings suggest the need for research in the following areas:

- Comparative studies on school and community factors that foster parent participation
- Schools and/or programs that attract parents into the school setting
- Factors that promote sustained parent leadership in different contexts
- The effects of different strategies and the relationship between strategies and issues.